

1991

An Explication of the Phaedo

Thahn Ngo
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives



Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), and the [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Ngo, Thahn (1991) "An Explication of the Phaedo," *Anthós Journal (1990-1996)*: Vol. 1: No. 2, Article 9. Available at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives/vol1/iss2/9

This open access Article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](#). All documents in PDXScholar should meet [accessibility standards](#). If we can make this document more accessible to you, [contact our team](#).

AN EXPLICATION OF THE *PHAEDO*

Thahn Ngo

The *Phaedo*, one of Plato's dialogues, is about the last moments of Socrates' life, the last day before his execution. The dialogue is narrated by Phaedo, who was also Socrates' pupil, to his friend Echechrates at some undetermined time after Socrates' death. Phaedo himself had been with Socrates until his death when he drank the hemlock. Why and how Socrates was sentenced to death is never disclosed by Plato in the dialogue. But like Plato's other dialogues, the *Phaedo* does not give a single meaning in its content, but many. These meanings and how they come about can be seen by the reader himself. In order to accomplish this task, Plato utilizes the narrative framework, sets up debates, and implements myths and allusions available to him at that time. The following is an attempt to look at these characteristics in the *Phaedo* and see how each one stands against the others.

Unlike the *Cratylus*, which is a live conversation throughout the entire dialogue, the *Phaedo* is set up so that only the beginning and two small parts in the middle of the dialogue are really live conversation between the narrator Phaedo and his audience Echechrates. The rest of the dialogue

is Phaedo's recollected narration and includes the speeches between Socrates, Simmias, Cebes, Crito, and others present at the time of Socrates' death.

The actual conversation at the beginning sets up the narration and informs of events leading up to that point. There is a similar trick in the *Symposium* where Apollodorus is being asked to recall the speeches at Agathon's dinner party after he had won the tragic contest. Plato does not just come out with the speeches themselves. By setting them up he creates meaning and the importance of both the actual speeches and the narrated speeches.

The interruption in the *Phaedo* is an interesting juncture in the dialogue. It may be that he is stressing the importance of the previous Socratic explanation by stopping the speeches so that the readers can contemplate them a little longer. Perhaps it is because of the following speeches where Phaedo is involved and to note his importance. Or it could be that Plato wants the reader to watch Echeocrates' reaction, for example, his feelings and understanding of the speeches. This interruption could have been at the end of the narration, thus, it has great importance in the dialogue.

The speeches in the narration seem to be in patterns. Socrates' speeches are often long explanations of and insights about natural phenomena such as the difference between the body and soul. When Socrates does give a short speech it is usually a question asking for confirmations or disagreements, mostly yes's and no's. In contrast, the others', mainly Simmias, Cebes, and Crito, speeches are mostly questions to or disagreements with Socrates' explanations, or short and simple answers to Socrates' questions. This itself stresses the difference in wisdom and apparent status between Socrates and the others.

The debate between Socrates and the others starts off with Cebes' question about suicide: Why is suicide not right? Socrates explains that the body belongs to the gods and that humans should not destroy what is not theirs. Then he goes on to distinguish the difference between the body and the soul, and why true philosophers look toward death instead of trying to avoid it. This then is the catalyst for the rest of the debate on the subject of the immortality of the soul.

Socrates explains the immortality of the soul using the concept of Heraclitean opposites, where everything is constantly changing to its opposite, such as night into day and sleeping into awake and vice versa; the doctrine of reminiscence where learning is a recollection of things known in past lives; and the decay of the body which is mortal due to impurities. Then he explains that soul is to body as harmony is to a lyre. When the lyre is broken harmony becomes invisible. The same is true of the soul when the body dies; it vanishes and no one can see it. Each argument presents a different meaning of the soul in accordance to its theory. This suggests that there is more than one meaning of the immortality of the soul.

There are two myths in the *Phaedo*, one at the beginning and one at the end. At the beginning of the dialogue Plato alludes to the myth of Theseus and his journey to Crete with seven youths and seven maidens. This myth created a custom that the city (Athens) must remain pure of public execution until the ship has returned. This delays Socrates' death, which he is oddly eager to face. To Socrates waiting for the ship is waiting for death.

At the end when Socrates is about to die, he tells Crito to offer a cock to Asclepius, the divine healer. It was a custom to offer a cock to Asclepius after a recovery from an illness. This action of Socrates says that he believes he is recovering and not dying.

Plato implements three allusions from the Homeric poems; one from the *Iliad* and two from the *Odyssey*. He uses the allusion from the *Iliad* in Socrates' explanation of hell. The two from the *Odyssey* he uses, describe self-control and self-esteem and wholeheartedness. It is not uncommon for Plato to use these allusions since the Homeric poems were available to him as sources of his education. Most writers and poets at that time use Homer's works to make points clear and concise to their readers.

Plato knows the importance of writing forms and characteristics, and he uses them in the *Phaedo*. He does not give us the immediate meaning of his works, but uses certain methods to create ways of meaning in the readers' eyes. He sets up the dialogue with information preparing for the main plot of the dialogue. This he does as in most of his works. Then he sets up the debate by bringing up a

simple question. This in turn pulls out allusions and myths. He knows where and when to implement these characteristics so that they change the meaning of what was before. None of Plato's works can be seen as having only one meaning and the *Phaedo* is no exception.